DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 140 304 CS 203 400

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TITLE A Self-Paced Writing Course at Georgia Tech: Building a Logical Sequence of Units in Rhetoric.
PUB DATE 77
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the 1977 Modern Language Association Conference

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Composition (Literary); *Composition Skills (Literary); Higher Education; Independent Study; *Pacing; *Programed Instruction; *Programed Units; Writing

ABSTRACT

For the heterogeneous class, a self-paced writing course is most effective, as it prevents more able or better-prepared students from becoming bored and slower students from becoming frustrated, and it provides the instructor with additional time to spend on enrichment for some students and extra help for others. A self-paced course which has proved successful at Georgia Institute of Technology consists of a sequence of seven units--the thesis, the pattern of an essay, the development of an argument, writing to a reader, evidence to support a thesis, the use of repetition, and building a conclusion. These units, focused on the reader's needs, contain a description of the concept being taught, explanations of its necessity and its relationship to previous units, an example of the concept properly applied, and a self-test. In addition to completing the self-paced units, each student writes four essays of gradually increasing length, outside of class and upon completion of specific units. Grades on these essays form the basis for the course guide. (JM)

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A Self-Paced Writing Course at Georgia Tech: Building a Logical Sequence of Units in Rhetoric

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A self-paced writing course is apparently the most effective one to use with any heterogenous class. It prevents more able or better prepared students from becoming bored; it prevents slower students from becoming frustrated; and it provides the instructor with additional time to spend on enrichment for more able students and extra help for slower ones. But a self-paced course has one difficulty. It should be based on a necessary sequence of presentation; that is, the units, or topics, in the course should be arranged in the order in which they need to be learned, each step dependent on the one prior to it and preparing the way for the one that must follow it. We believe that we have solved this problem, at least for instruction in one kind of writing. We believe that we have been able to create a sequence of seven units which teach any writer an effective model for expository/argumentative prose, a sequence which takes a student from the creation

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of a thesis to the composing of a conclusion, and which provides objective criteria for evaluating the student mastery of the units and its application to his essay writing.

We obtained the sequence through two means. First, we focused, in the self-paced portion of the course, entirely on rhetoric. The self-paced units did not teach syntax, punctuation or usage, nor did they provide any humanistic content. Obviously these elements are necessary and should be part of any writing course. We dealt with them by making competency in mechanics a requirement for passing the course, and by providing assistance in the form of help sessions, programmed instruction, and individual conferences. The humanities requirement was at least acknowledged by a single weekly lecture-discussion based on a text of contemporary prose, a requirement that the students write about the issues explored in the text, and by recognition that while other courses in the institute would provide a far more substantial humanities content, no other course but this one would teach composition.

Second, in order to provide a conceptual basis for the sequence, we determined to focus on writing as a learning process, both for the writer who clarifies his own idea as he attempts to express it and for the reader who reads an expository essay to find a clarification and support of a

single idea. We wanted to make the writer aware of his own composing behavior and thus help him to control it and orient it toward the reader's learning behavior. We wanted to help the writer to meet the reader's needs for an orderly pattern of exposition, for convincing evidence to support a position and for a clear, unambiguous position to be supported. Based on the students' performance in the course, in their reactions to it, and in their grades in succeeding English courses, we believe that we were able to do this.

Our seven units were: "The Thesis," creating a thesis sentence; "The Pattern of an Essay," building a first paragraph which supports and clarifies the thesis and which in turn can be expanded to create the rest of the essay; "The Development of an Argument," the orderly expansion of the first paragraph; "Writing to a Reader," understanding a specific reader's assumptions about a given topic and creating a paragraph that responds in terms of those assumptions; "Evidence to Support a Thesis," the selection of information best suited to support the needs of a specific reader; "The Use of Repetition," using repetition to reinforce the reader's understanding of a line of argument; and "Building a Conclusion," the view of a conclusion as a more developed version of the writer's learning process.

As can be seen from the description above, each of these is focused on the reader's needs, and each uses that reader's needs as a guide.

Each of the units contained a description of the concept being taught, an explanation of how it was necessary to fill the reader's needs, and how it was based on the concepts explained in previous units. It also showed the concept properly applied. To insure that they understood the concept the students were asked to complete a self-test. These self-tests were artificial exercises, not actual essays. It was explained to the students that the exercises were artificial because they focused exclusively on a single part of the integrated writing process. In the exercise on sequencing, for example, the students were shown how arguments were a sequence of assertions, each following naturally from the one prior to it and each leading reasonably to the one following it, with each assertion being the central idea of a paragraph. The students were then given several related assertions to fill gaps and then write the first paragraph of the essay which would contain them. The exercise is artificial; it does not mirror the actual composing process, but it does provide a test of the students' grasp of the concept and is easily correctable.

The two classes each week not devoted to lecture-discussion were spent entirely in checking students' self-tests, questioning them about their understanding of the concept, and answering any questions they might have about the material. All tests were evaluated in terms of pass/fail, with complete mastery of the concept being required to achieve a pass grade. In cases where mastery was not achieved, we worked through the material with the student, provided additional explanation where needed, and had him take another test. Thus it can be seen that while the material was self-paced, it was not programmed. The self-paced units provided the basis for short tutorials in class, the amount of time spent on each ranging from less than 2 minutes for those who had clearly understood the concept to a series of 2 or 3 minute periods scattered throughout the 50 minute class period for those who were having difficulty. Since we had twenty classes of 50 minutes in which to cover seven units with 24 students it is apparent that there was sufficient time to give each student at least the minimal necessary individual attention.

In addition to completing the units of self-paced material, each student wrote four essays; the essays were of gradually increasing length, beginning at four hundred words and ending

at a thousand. All of these essays were written outside of class and were done at the completion of certain specific units. Thus although the course was self-paced, a student had to complete and hand in a four hundred word essay after completing unit 2 and before beginning unit 3. The grades on these essays formed the basis for the course grade. The grading criteria for the essays was based on the units the students had completed. Thus while the student had to master all of the concepts presented in the course and prove his mastery of them on the self-tests, he was aware that his course grade ultimately depended on his ability to apply the concpets to a specific writing problem.

With this in mind it is now possible to describe the specific units themselves. Unit 1, "The Thesis," is based on the idea that first most students are unable to create a thesis capable of being developed into an essay and that this problem occurs in most cases because their assertion is a simple statement of opinion which they do not have the facts at hand to support. To fill space and complete an assignment they are thus led to simple listing of all the facts bearing on the topic, or, even worse, to the creation of a series of tangents.

To respond to this problem, to help the writer create a thesis that he can support, we attempted to slow down his creating process and make him conscious of it. It is our belief, based on watching writers at work and asking them to stop at various stages and describe their activities, that the creation of a thesis frequently happens in the following way. Presented with any topic, the writer recalls the information about that topic which is immediately available to him. That body of information, in fact, is the topic for him. He also has a point of view; this term, which we use in its broadest sense, is the writer's perspective on reality. His point of view, when applied to the information called to his mind by the mention of any specific subject, allows the writer to create a relationship among those items of information he has recalled. It enables him to give each item a specific significance in relation to the other items. That significance, stated in the form of an assertion, is the writer's tentative thesis.

Some of this we explained to our students; primarily we made it clear that theses arise when the writer creates a relationship among pieces of information; that the information is always prior to the relationship. The students were given pieces of information not related to the same topic

and asked to create a relationship for them. Then with their confidence in their own relation-making ability reinforced, they were given items of information related to a single topic and asked to create several different relationships for these items, thus confirming to them the fact that these relationships do not reside in the items themselves, but are created and imposed by the writer. Finally, the students were given several topics and asked to provide both information and relationships. Throughout these exercises the students were made aware that writing is a learning process, that as they create relationships among elements that they had previously considered diverse, they learn a significance, though not the significance, for this information.

The next unit, Unit 2, "The Pattern of an Essay," continues to show him how he learns, but now shows him how to control and make use of that learning. It also introduces the notion of responding to the reader's needs as a learner. Unit 2 is based on the idea that the writer will continue to learn as he writes, that new information will suggest itself during the composing process, as will new relationships. The writer must find a way to avoid inhibiting this learning process but at the same time he must control it in order to prevent tangents. We believe that the reader learns most

efficiently if he is shown the pattern according to which the essay will develop. He should know the specific connections which exist among the main sub-assertions which support and clarify the thesis.

Unit 2 teaches the writer to satisfy these needs, both his own and his reader's. We explain to the writer that since his thesis is based on a relationship he created among four or five pieces of information, it is possible for him to briefly state these relationships in the remaining sentences of his first paragraph. The first paragraph thus provides the pattern for the rest of the essay.

The argument which was only briefly sketched in the first paragraph is developed by the rest of the essay. The reader, because he understands the form that the argument will take, is prepared for the development and so easily makes the transition between the different parts of the argument. The writer also gains from the first paragraph: it keeps him focused on the single point that he promises to develop. At the same time, it allows him to develop, within the boundaries of the argument, new ideas that come to him as he writes.

Unit 3, "Writing to a Reader," is also devoted to the first paragraph. The student is given a specific reader and asked to describe that reader's characteristics, then to write

an opening paragraph which takes into account not only the concepts of Unit 2, but also the reader's own frame of reference. He is asked to rewrite his first paragraph, retaining all the relationships he established during Unit 2 but now focusing them towards the point of view, the preconceptions, of his intended reader.

Unit 4, "The Development of an Argument," explains that an argument is an orderly sequence of ideas and that the argument will be successful only if the order is apparent to the intended reader. The writer is shown how to summarize the paragraphs that compose an argument, then evaluate the sequence of summary sentences to insure that each develops from the one prior to it and prepares for the one that follows it. He is given exercises in which he reorders confusing sequences, deletes tangents, and adds necessary steps in the argument. He is then asked to do this to his own essays. Since the basic pattern of his essay was established in its first paragraph, his reordering usually takes the form of adding a step in a sequence or deleting a tangent.

Unit 5, "Evidence to Support a Thesis," is an explanation of the evidence finding and selecting process in writing. Just as the writer has learned that in many ways it is easier to write when he allows the reader's needs to determine the

organizational pattern, so now he learns that it is far easier to find evidence to support his thesis if he asks not "what evidence can I think of to support this thesis," but "considering my reader's knowledge of the subject and preconceptions about it, what evidence will support the thesis most clearly to him." The evidence thus grows naturally out of the perceived connection between thesis and reader.

Unit 6, "Using Strategic Repetition," shows a student how to make use of the intentional repetition of key ideas to clarify his line of argument to the reader. It shows them how the overlap of ideas in the classical syllogism expressed in the second premise, is necessary in order to avoid confusion. It shows them structural repetition of ideas, the stating of each new assertion in terms of its relation to the previous assertion reveals to the reader the series of connections that comprise the writers' line of reasoning. In the exercises of the Unit, students are given sequences of assertions and are asked to rewrite them in a way that makes clear through repetition of key terms or concepts, the connections that they perceive in the sequence.

Unit 7, "Developing a Conclusion," shows the writer's how to make use of what they have learned as they wrote the essay. The thesis, is of course, the one point they wish to

make in the essay, and the rest of the first paragraph establishes the pattern within which they will support and clarify this idea to their reader. But in the process of composing their essay, of finding additional evidence of explaining their thesis to their reader, the writer comes to understand more fully both his thesis itself and its relation to the rest of the general topic. In Unit 7, the writer learns to see his conclusion not primarily as a summary of his argument, but as the representation of his original thesis in a more sophisticated form, thus making use of his own increased understanding and simultaneously giving the reader a reward for remaining with the author until he has finished the essay.

The course appears to have been a success. In giving the students control over their own rate of progress we improved the attitude of both good students who had felt kept back by the class, and of poor students who had not been able to keep up with even the standard class rate. In creating a progressive sequence, we were able to grade whole essays even in the first few weeks, and grade them entirely within the criteria established by the Units themselves. And finally, by using the units to establish clear and measurable objectives for students to meet in their essays, we removed much of the mystery and consequent hostility which surrounds the

grading process.

Through the structured tutorial process of evaluating mastery of units, we were able to work with each student individually, to see his special writing problems and help him to correct them. They came to see the instructors as coaches rather than evaluations--perhaps for that reason, we enjoyed the course as much as they did.

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